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*Stephan Ortmann**

Political Change and Civil Society Coalitions in Singapore

In the past few years, a number of civil society coalitions have emerged in the illiberal city-state of Singapore. They are the unintended result of a controlled process of liberalization which was initiated by the government in the 1990s in response to growing demands for participation. In particular, the internet has contributed to a more assertive, independent and better organized civil society, which can be seen as a significant step in the process of political change in the city-state.

CIVIL SOCIETY COALITIONS, WHICH ARE PREVALENT IN MALAYSIA AND many other countries around the world, are a very recent phenomenon in the hegemonic party-state of Singapore and are a reflection of the increasing liberalization of the political system. The internet in particular has given civic activists more freedom to organize and consequently transformed Singapore politics. This is, of course, first and foremost reflected in the country's development from a closed hegemonic party-state to a competitive authoritarian regime in recent years (Ortmann 2011). For the few civil society coalitions that have emerged in the last few years, the main concern has been the improvement of human rights, as in the situation of migrant workers and the use of the death penalty. An official coalition was also formed to submit a report on the human rights situation to the United Nations. More recently, civil society groups have worked on a coalition against the infamous Internal Security Act (ISA), which as late as 1987 was used against political activists and continues to serve as a reminder of the state's ability arbitrarily to curtail dissent. Finally, the spirit of cooperation has also affected activists who are trying to avert the construction of an eight-lane highway through Bukit Brown, one of Singapore's historic Chinese cemeteries as well as one of the few remaining largely undisturbed green spaces.

* Stephan Ortmann is a Research Fellow in the Department of Asian and International Studies at the City University of Hong Kong. Contact email: *ortmann.stephan@gmail.com*.

Historically, similar to other soft authoritarian regimes, the Singaporean government has created significant obstacles even to the development of independent civil society groups. Despite introducing the concept of 'civic society' in 1991 and demanding greater participation from the people, Singapore's hegemonic ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has tried to absorb virtually all demands from society and maintains strict restrictions on civil society organizations. The state sees itself as a neutral player that is mainly interested in pursuing the common good and is thus unwilling to concede significant space to interest groups that pursue particularistic goals. The People's Action Party is fundamentally opposed to an independent civil society that could challenge its monopoly of power and therefore it has tried to improve its strategies of co-option and control instead (Rodan 2003). Thanks mainly to the internet, the situation in Singapore has changed somewhat in recent years.

This article will first discuss the relationship between the emergence of civil society coalitions and political change. Because these coalitions reflect a growing challenge to an illiberal regime, their existence demonstrates the decline of the government's hegemonic control and thus also reflects the ongoing process of political transformation. Singapore provides a very good case because, up until very recently, civil society was so heavily curtailed that there was hardly any independent activism. A controlled liberalization process has slowly changed this. Besides promoting the concept of civic society and greater inclusiveness, the growing freedom of the internet has opened new avenues in which activists can mobilize their members. The third part of this article then turns to the reasons for and limits of civil society coalitions in Singapore. While many institutional barriers remain that inhibit these coalitions from increasing in size and importance, there is growing cooperation between civil society groups that signifies the emergence of what might be called 'coalitional capital'. This article is based on a range of sources which include confidential interviews with civil society activists, press releases, newspaper articles and other internet sources.

CIVIL SOCIETY COALITIONS AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN ILLIBERAL REGIMES

While the role of civil society in political change has long been a focus of the comparative politics literature,[1] relatively little attention

has been paid to the phenomenon of coalition formations between different civil society groups in the context of political changes – one of the few exceptions is Meredith Weiss (2006). Studies on civil society in South-East Asia, in particular under soft authoritarian rule in countries such as Singapore and Malaysia, have asserted that most of the public sphere has been more closely linked to the state. It consists of various different groups, usually small and highly fragmented. In addition, many of them are significantly co-opted by the state.[2] As a consequence, it is possible to distinguish two types of civil society: a challenging or transgressive type, which consists of groups that willingly engage the government through various means of contentious politics, and a supportive or symbiotic type in which the groups closely collaborate with the government and avoid conflicts (Thompson 2012). Scholars making this distinction argue that many of the soft authoritarian regimes in South-East Asia are closer to the second type (Hughes 2009). As such the attempt to establish new alliances between previously fragmented independent groups suggests the growth of a more challenging civil society as the result of growing dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of official channels and a greater willingness to publicly oppose the government.[3] On the one hand, the greater union suggests a decline in the hegemony of the once unified ruling elite, leading to a more pluralistic society. On the other hand, this newfound spirit of collaboration provides evidence for the argument that increasingly complex societies make it harder for unitary states to implement policies without the help of societal groups. The states are consequently motivated to grant non-governmental groups greater political space to pursue their interests as part of a state-led civil society (Frolic 1997).

Civil society plays an important role during all stages of political change, which is conceived of as the development towards a more participatory, transparent and accountable politics but does not necessarily have to be understood as the transformation towards a new political system or democratization (Alagappa 2004). There are so many different definitions of civil society that it is impossible even to attempt to summarize them in this context. For this reason, I want to concentrate briefly on how the concept is used in this article. Civil society here is understood along the lines of Alagappa (2004: 9) as 'a distinct public sphere of organization, communication and reflective discourse, and governance among individuals and groups that take collective action deploying civil means to

influence the state and its policies but not capture state power, and whose activities are not motivated by profit'. In other words, civil society is mainly organized by non-governmental groups that pursue civic concerns and do not compete for political office. At first, the liberalization of some spheres leads to the emergence of civil society, and subsequently pressure from civil society can lead to greater political space and a willingness to accommodate the demands of societal actors. Civil society groups therefore play an important role in political change, which may or may not eventually lead to regime change.

As a consequence of the liberalization process, the government is losing its ability to contain what Meredith Weiss (2006) has called 'coalitional capital', which is the mutual trust that exists between different groups to form larger alliances. Under normal circumstances, an illiberal regime will try to inhibit its emergence, but economic development and the increasing complexity of the state make it increasingly difficult to curtail. Weiss argues that this kind of common understanding takes a long time and frequent interaction before different groups will start to engage each other. However, once civil society groups are capable of forming coalitions and perceive an opportunity for political change, they will become more effective in their campaign because achieving reform in an illiberal regime requires greater unity between dissidents. The willingness to unite for a single cause signifies a tendency towards greater independence among the activists with regard to the state. Alliances between different civil society groups thus arise when there is strong and concerted opposition among the greatest possible number of groups against a particularly salient law or other issue (Scott 2010). It is a reflection of a greater cohesiveness and consensus between once fragmented groups.

In order for civil society to be effective in achieving its goals, many have argued that independence is crucial. Carothers (1999: 26), for instance, proposes that in dictatorships, 'a key element of their political bona fides is complete independence, financial and otherwise, from the government.' True independence may be difficult to achieve because many of the groups have to establish a working relationship with the government to avoid repression or marginalization. However, in many authoritarian regimes there are limited realms in which some form of independent political activity is accepted. It is this narrow space that can be considered the roots of civil society coalitions in an authoritarian regime. If these groups

ally against some government policy, it demonstrates their ability to achieve greater independence from the state and a development towards a more assertive civil society.

Besides demonstrating independence, civil society coalitions also highlight a growing consensus about a certain public policy, and these coalitions become increasingly difficult for the authoritarian government to ignore. For example, the Ugandan Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights and Constitutional Law presently unites 51 non-governmental groups to fight a controversial anti-homosexuality law that would not only make homosexual activity illegal but in some cases even mandate the death penalty (Uganda Civil Society Coalition 2012). For their success in organizing, the US State Department awarded the alliance the Human Rights Defender Award in 2012 (see US Department of State 2012). While the group has not yet succeeded in stopping the legislation, the thriving movement has demonstrated that many of Uganda's non-governmental groups have a growing capacity to cooperate effectively. However, this approach also shows a weakness of the coalitions: the focus on a particular issue means that they often lack the ability to survive beyond the realization of their goals.

Civil society coalitions have at times even pressured illiberal regimes to move towards greater democracy. In South Korea, for instance, the National Coalition for Democracy Movement, a large alliance of various civil society groups, was formed in 1986 to put pressure on the authoritarian regime to introduce more democracy (Kim 2000). While the coalition did not last very long, it still demonstrated a growing consensus among the various groups that political change was needed. Research has shown that the strength of the coalitions among the civic groups improved the chances of successful transition to liberal democracy (Shin and Tusalem 2007). However, this does not mean that the emergence of civil society coalitions automatically leads to greater democracy. Authoritarian leaders may use cooptation and/or repression to fragment the movement and thus limit the influence of these groups (Weiss 2006: 48).

Even though there is not necessarily a link between the rise of civil society coalitions and democratization, the existence of the coalitions still indicates that significant political change has occurred. The greater willingness to challenge the state demonstrates a growing societal consensus and a maturing civil society that can no longer be easily silenced. The coalitions are also a reflection

of the state's declining power over society as new actors are trying to fill the space that has been created by a previously hegemonic or near-hegemonic state.

THE CONTROLLED LIBERALIZATION OF SINGAPORE'S ILLIBERAL REGIME

Before we can discuss the development of civil society coalitions in Singapore in recent years, it is necessary to provide an overview of the city-state's illiberal political system and its recent attempts to steer a controlled liberalization process. Before the 1990s, Singapore's political system left very little political space for independent activism. In fact, the People's Action Party government had after the end of British colonialism in 1959 successively removed any form of political activity, creating what Chan Heng Chee (1975: 51) has famously called an 'administrative state' in which 'the meaningful political arena is shifting, or has shifted to the bureaucracy.' The government believed that Singapore had been overly politicized during the latter part of colonialism, resulting in race riots and communist agitation. Moreover, in the postcolonial era, economic growth became the most important goal for the survival of the city-state, reflected in the adoption of the developmental state model (Pereira 2008). Part of this approach to economic development was that the labour movement had to be completely demobilized, which removed a potential obstacle to the capitalist elite in their developmental aspirations. In 1966, a modified version of the Societies Act gave the government broad discretionary rights over the registration of any societal organization. Finally, the press was also brought under complete control of government-linked corporations in the late 1970s, which paved the way for the near-total hegemony of the ruling party in the following years. The People's Action Party believed that competing political groups are unnecessary and even detrimental in a small city-state such as Singapore. Instead, the People's Action Party's internal renewal processes were considered sufficient to produce new ideas and maintain good governance (Chong 2005: 276–7).

Despite the government's tendency to control the whole political process, the growing complexities which resulted from economic modernization led to the decision to strategically liberalize parts of society, albeit under tight controls by the government. The government

reacted to the changing demands from society by becoming more responsive. When in 1985 the government announced its decision to implement a so-called Graduate Mothers' programme, it resulted in widespread opposition. Then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew had been convinced that educated women should be encouraged to procreate in order to maintain a gene pool of intelligent people. The highly unpopular programme was scrapped in 1986 after the ruling party suffered its worst electoral setback since gaining power in 1959. Moreover, in 1985 a number of women had formed a new independent non-governmental women's rights group called the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), which appeared willing to challenge the government on issues of gender equality. This demonstrated that society had become more diversified and new demands had emerged that the government could no longer respond to with its previous hierarchical and technocratic approach.

However, only one year later, in 1987, the newfound activism was dampened by the so-called Operation Spectrum, when the government arrested 22 Catholic activists who were close to the Workers' Party and accused them of subversion in what was labelled by the press as a 'Marxist conspiracy'. Internal statements reveal that the government did not really see any significant danger from the activists but was more concerned about the mobilizing capacity of the Church and its most activist priests. Michael D. Barr (2008) argues that even though the movement within the Catholic Church threatened neither the state nor the nation, it restricted the government's ability to set the national agenda. Moreover, a crucial outcome of the affair was that it reinforced the climate of fear, which discourages any political activism outside the state. It is therefore not surprising that groups such as the Association of Women for Action and Research became largely 'non-political' and reformist. In order to maintain some influence in politics (and perhaps also to avoid deregistration), the women's rights group established a close relationship with the government, which, as Lyons (2000) points out, has severely constrained the ability of the group to pursue its own agenda.

Despite the negative impact of the 1987 arrests on activism, there were still incidents of repeated periods of mobilization and minor instances of contentious politics. The Nature Society, which had successfully convinced the government to protect a mangrove area

in 1986, started a signature campaign in 1992 to save a forest area from being turned into a golf course. Again, with the help of significant research, the group was able to convince the government to protect the area. However, overall the group started to resemble the Association of Women for Action and Research in that it preferred an indirect and consultative approach to promoting its goals. In fact, the group refused to become officially involved in the 2001 movement to protect the Chek Jawa marine area. Only when the government abandoned the land reclamation project did the Nature Society work together with the government to develop it for recreational purposes. Civil society groups became careful in their approach with the government with which they often cooperated (Chong 2002; Lee 2002). Leading members of these independent civil society groups, including the Association of Women for Action and Research and the Nature Society, even became nominated members of Parliament, which incorporated them even more closely into the political system and thus moderated their demands (Rodan 2009).

In June 1991, the government outlined its vision for a 'civic society', which aimed at increasing public participation while not providing space for potential challengers. Acting Minister of Information and the Arts George Yeo described the impending institutional changes by using the metaphor of the pruning of a banyan tree, which is a massive tree in whose shadow not much can grow. The message was clear: the government should reduce its influence over society. As a consequence, the government has to a certain degree allowed non-governmental groups more freedom and tried increasingly to incorporate them in the decision-making process. While substantive challenges to government policymaking would still not be permitted and the government would continue to set the agenda, non-governmental organizations should help in the implementation of government programmes. Moreover, all grass-roots organizations continued to be administratively linked to the government in an attempt to co-opt political leaders and reduce the political threats from other more independent groups (Tan 2003). The steps towards liberalization were therefore merely 'attempts to accommodate increasingly complex and divergent social interests without conceding independent political space for opposition and dissent' (Rodan 1996: 105).

The government has always maintained strict controls over the liberalization process, which meant that any concession of political

space was closely monitored and if necessary followed up by renewed restrictions. The establishment of a Speakers' Corner is a good example. Modelled on the famous spot in London, the idea behind such a place for public assemblies was to allow some room for political expression in a manageable space. It was a major change in a city-state in which public protests had previously been totally unheard of as applications by activists had routinely been rejected. Even so, the state would not make it easy for activists to use the space to challenge government policies. The park's size is relatively small, it is not centrally located, and audio-enhancing devices were initially not allowed. The government at first still required that a permit was issued to speak at the location, although it was now much easier to obtain. This requirement was only lifted in 2008, when the government allowed instant registrations (Saad 2008). However, only one year later, in 2009, it again installed a CCTV camera as a sign that any protest must be carefully monitored (Wong and Ow 2009). Moreover, this small park remains more a token of the government's intentions than anything else because most public events at the corner are ignored by the mass media, which consists of two government-linked media conglomerates. Despite these limitations, prominent activists have repeatedly made use of the park and events such as Pink Dot (in support of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights), Slutwalk (against sexual violence) and others have taken place there. In 2011, even the youth wing of the ruling People's Action Party staged an event highlighting the rising cost of public transport.

Far more important for activists has been the relatively liberal approach to the internet. Unlike other authoritarian regimes such as China's, with its infamous Great Firewall, the People's Action Party government has mostly opted to refrain from outright censoring or blocking online content.[4] The reason for this is mainly the economic benefits that the internet provides. At the same time, however, the government has tried to apply some of the same heavy-handed measures to online media as it has to traditional media. For instance, strict legislation such as the Sedition Act, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act or the Law of Defamation have been applied to online content. As a consequence, there have already been attempts to file lawsuits against website operators as leading members of Singapore's ruling elite have done against the foreign media. It is for this reason that the administrators of the

sociopolitical blog Online Citizen have a lawyer to check all their articles.[5] The main goal has obviously been self-censorship (Rodan 1998). Additionally, the *Straits Times* reported in 2007 that the People's Action Party was organizing a group of people who could spread moderate comments to counter the anti-People's Action Party sentiments on various online platforms (Li 2007); this, however, produced very little effect.

While there have been a great number of attempts to curtail online activism, it is clear that the sheer size of the internet, the ability to hide behind pseudonyms, the use of foreign-based sites and social networks have significantly broadened the space for activists. The growth of these new technologies has inadvertently led to greater freedoms which have been successfully used by both social and political activists. The 2006 and 2011 elections have shown that the internet plays an increasingly important role in politics by providing more information on the opposition and influencing the public agenda (Lee 2011; Ortmann 2011). This arguably helped the opposition parties to gain in strength as they were able to capture six seats in the 2011 election, the greatest success in postcolonial history.

In particular, the advent of social media has significantly changed the ability of individuals and activists to influence the political system. While in 2006 blogs could only highlight the large crowds at opposition party rallies still ignored by the mass media at the time, in 2011 social networks provided alternative information on a broad variety of topics and integrated large numbers of different types of information such as videos, songs, cartoons, boycotts, petitions and careful analysis. In particular, the social media website Facebook has been credited with providing a platform for disseminating alternative viewpoints, creating groups of common interests and organizing events. As Seelan Palay, an activist, notes, 'thanks to Facebook you can sort of gauge how many people there actually are' (in Chiang 2010). The internet has moreover made it much harder for the government to arrest someone merely to set an example, as it had done during the 'Marxist conspiracy'. The case of Abdul Malik, who was arrested for a short time for a figurative comment he made on Facebook, clearly demonstrates this. The internet community quickly spread his comments and most users agreed that Malik had not meant to literally burn a minister. As a consequence of the massive mobilization on the internet, Malik himself asserts: 'My family was worried. They are fearful, like most Singaporeans, that

the police can take any case and charge you for it. [. . .] Yes, in the 40s and 50s you might be able to do that. But now with the Internet, you can't' (in Choo 2011). The internet has also been crucial in the formation of new activist groups. For instance, the Singapore Anti-Death Penalty Campaign (SADPC), a 'coalition of independent activists', was formed in 2005, mainly with the help of online media, which used the internet to avoid the strict registration requirements for sociopolitical groups. Without a doubt, the internet has been crucial for the development of social movements in the otherwise closed society. It is thus not surprising that it has also been a key factor in the emergence of civil society coalitions.

BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY COALITIONS IN SINGAPORE'S CHANGING POLITICAL SYSTEM

The government's controlled liberalization efforts and the growing importance of the internet have significantly transformed the political system and have released greater 'coalitional capital'. Political activism has become much more common and better organized. Civil society groups have increasingly formed to advocate for their goals and challenged the authorities and have shown a growing interest in cooperating with each other. In this section, I want first to introduce the most important coalitions. Then I will show – based on the interview data and official statements – what has led to the development of these coalitions. Finally, I will delve into the huge obstacles that continue to exist for the future formation and expansion of coalitions.

In the beginning civil society coalitions were mostly limited to 'political' groups that dealt with controversial areas such as human rights issues. The first known coalition, formed in 2009, was the Solidarity for Migrant Workers, which combined just three non-governmental organizations, Migrant Voices, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) and the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME). It was formed to represent the interests of the growing migrant community in Singapore, who make up 30 per cent of the workforce and are mostly employed in low-paid positions. The Coalition of Singapore Non-Governmental Organizations (COSINGO), formed in 2010 and spearheaded by MARUAH (the Working Group for an Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Human Rights Mechanism, Singapore), was somewhat bigger as it linked eight

different groups. However, compared to its Malaysian counterpart, the Coalition of Malaysian Non-Governmental Organizations (COMANGO), on which it was based and which had united 56 groups, the Singaporean version was comparatively small. The union brought together by MARUAH also included the women's rights group the Association of Women for Action and Research, the disability rights groups Challenged People's Alliance and Network (CAN!) and the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Federation, the gay rights group People Like Us, the political association Singaporeans for Democracy (SFD) and the migrant rights groups Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics and Transient Workers Count Too. Its main goal was to produce a human rights report to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review. The report that was submitted outlined serious shortcomings with regard to the human rights situation in Singapore, such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, registration of societies, preventive detention, the death penalty, free and fair elections and gay and lesbian rights, among many others. While it was limited in its objective, the organizers saw it as a test case for future collaboration among human rights groups. Activists have since continued their efforts at coalition formation with the focus on the infamous Internal Security Act. The Act allows for arrest without warrant and is felt to be a particularly salient issue that will achieve the greatest consensus. According to one of the organizers, James Gomez, who has advocated the use of coalitions to increase the power of non-governmental groups, there is a broad consensus within society on the opposition to the Internal Security Act.[6] The Coalition against the Internal Security Act was aimed at repealing a piece of legislation that has for a long time acted as a deterrent to political activism. The issue was intentionally kept as narrow as possible to allow the coalition to be as broad as possible but would only include groups that are either registered as political associations or not registered as non-governmental groups. Groups which are regarded as non-political by the government would not participate in such a coalition and are thus not considered. While it is unclear whether the coalition will materialize, two groups involved in the coalition-formation process organized a public event called 'That We May Dream Again' at Speakers' Corner on 2 June 2012 to remember the 1987 arrests of the so-called Marxist conspirators. The event attracted more than 400 people (Boey 2012). While it was led by the civil society groups MARUAH and Function 8, members of the Singapore Democratic Party also spoke at the event, which was the first time that members of both civil and political society had participated in

an event together. Braema Mathi, head of MARUAH, spoke optimistically about the outcome of the event: 'I think we will have a better civil society who will engage the government on issues that will matter to them' (Boey 2012). Unfortunately, the coalition formation was ended when the leading organization Singaporeans for Democracy was deregistered as a political society in June 2012 due to the many legal restrictions that the organization had faced during its time of existence.[7]

Even though formal coalitions have so far been restricted to political issues because they could potentially be seen as a threat to the hegemony of the ruling party, other less politically contentious policy fields (in the Singaporean context) have also seen the development of greater official collaboration. In particular, in the area of protecting the few remaining parts of Singapore's heritage and nature, there is growing readiness to cooperate with like-minded groups and also a greater willingness to challenge the government. This happened when a large number of groups came together to save Bukit Brown, the largest historic Chinese cemetery outside China, from the construction of a proposed eight-lane expressway between 2011 and 2012. The Nature Society, which until recently had refused to engage in acts of contentious politics, early on joined other groups in a petition and organized a number of public walks through the cemetery to highlight why it was necessary to preserve this historically and environmentally important part of Singapore. This demonstrated a new willingness to engage more confrontationally with the government than in the past. The newfound energy among activists also led to a change in the Heritage Society's decision to pursue its consultative approach. When the group announced its cooperation with the government in documenting the graves, it was instantly criticized for not forcefully opposing the project. In response, the group defended itself by asserting that it had never been consulted with regard to the construction of the road and that it had asked for more time for public consultation (Singapore Heritage Society 2011). The government's attempt to compromise with the activists by deciding to build a bridge over part of the cemetery did not satisfy the opposition movement and a call for a moratorium on the eight-lane highway was signed by the Nature Society and the Heritage Society, together with the Asia Paranormal Investigators, All Things Bukit Brown, SOS Bukit Brown, Green Corridor, and Green Drinks (Community for Bukit Brown 2012). While it is unlikely that the call will be heeded, the groups were able to show unprecedented unity.

Coalitions of civil society groups have come together for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, the internet was the driving force behind the growing collaboration. According to a number of organizers, it helped bring together the disparate factions within civil society.[8] In particular, the internet has brought together newly emerging online groups and registered civil society groups. For instance, the unregistered online anti-death penalty groups (mainly the Singapore Anti-Death Penalty Campaign and We Believe in Second Chances) were able to garner the cooperation of a number of non-governmental organizations and political parties, including MARUAH, Singaporeans for Democracy, Think Centre and the Law Society. The Online Citizen, which was forced to become a registered political association in early 2011, also played a crucial role by actively supporting the movement. The Singapore Anti-Death Penalty Campaign even joined an international coalition, the Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN), organized by Amnesty International, together with Singaporeans for Democracy and the Think Centre. Similarly, in the cooperation in the Bukit Brown campaign many of the groups were unregistered alliances of 'independent' Singaporeans which cooperated more actively with officially registered civil society groups. These instances signal an ongoing transformation process in Singapore's civil society in which a growing number of groups have developed coalitional capital and the willingness to challenge the government.

The internet thus provided the political space necessary to create the important links and networks between disparate groups and hence enhanced the coalitional capital needed to establish coalitions or other cooperation. As a consequence, it facilitated the making of compromises between the different groups, which used to be very difficult when communication mechanisms were lacking. As it was not an easy process because it was time consuming and not immediately clear to the participants whether it would eventually have a significant impact on the political process, the ability to use the internet provided a solid platform for the negotiation process.

Moreover, the organizations align themselves because there are many advantages to cooperation. The pooling of resources, for instance, allows them to combine manpower and reduce overheads, which makes them more efficient. In the case of Solidarity, the cooperation was not only meant to demonstrate unity among like-minded groups but was also intended to combine resources,

enabling them to collaborate in larger projects. They cooperated in the organization of International Migrants Day in 2010 and conducted research together. Because civil society groups in Singapore tend to be very small and have few members, cooperation can widen their ability to act in certain fields.

Moreover, the combined groups' greater size will translate into greater effectiveness in putting pressure on the government to listen to their concerns than individual groups could ever achieve. As Weiss (2006) argues, the degree of coordination between activists determines the impact of the challenge. Fundamental reforms require substantial unity among the different players. For instance, one group within Solidarity asserted that the alliance provided 'a more effective and sustainable response to the issues that migrant workers face' (Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics 2009).

Finally, the coalitions are intended to strengthen future cooperation within civil society. For instance, Singaporeans for Democracy advocated the idea of collaborating to achieve greater social capital among local non-governmental organizations (Chia 2012). The interaction should build trust between the groups, which can then provide the basis for more cooperation in the future. As such, these small early coalitions are seen as the first step for a stronger and more independent civil society in the future. So far, these first steps have shown some success but have also raised questions as to whether coalitional capital can be expanded in the future as these coalitions have remained relatively small and fragile.

There are a number of reasons why, despite the growing coalitional capital, the formation of alliances has not been more aggressive. First and foremost, the still relatively narrow political space that I have mentioned previously still poses limits on the size of these coalitions and the kind of groups that are willing to join. In particular, registration requirements under the Societies Act keep the number of independent civil society groups small, and existing collaborative engagements with the government put some blocks in the way of intergroup cooperation.

Secondly, another obstacle is the government's successful attempt to create a largely depoliticized civic space that is careful to avoid politics. This is naturally not easy for any activist who wants to achieve some form of policy change. In Singapore, the civic space has been promoted as a 'neutral, common space' in which the

government will take the role of the neutral arbiter to maintain the equilibrium between different groups and promotes the idea that 'each group is to respect the status quo and not seek preeminence' (Ghani and Koh 2011). In this understanding of civil society, non-partisan activists who challenge the system are framed as troublemakers or gadflies. Moreover, if the activist belongs to one of the opposition parties in Singapore, he or she is then accused of politicizing the issue (Ghani and Koh 2011). The division between the two spheres has also contributed to the unwillingness of some groups to cooperate with opposition parties or even groups that are controlled by members of the opposition. In particular, groups such as MARUAH see the need for a clear division between civil society and political society. Closer cooperation with opposition parties that favour similar goals are rejected out of concern that this could make the activities appear partisan. This, however, poses significant challenges to the existence of civil society coalitions. On the one hand, there is significant overlap in terms of membership between civil society activists and some opposition parties. When James Gomez, the head of Singaporeans for Democracy, ran for political office in the 2011 general election as a member of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), it threatened the alliance within the Coalition of Singapore Non-Governmental Organizations as a number of civil society groups no longer wanted to participate. On the other hand, opposition parties such as the Singapore Democratic Party have campaigned for human rights issues for a long time. While this makes it a potential ally to a more broad-based coalition, the strict boundaries between politics and civil society activism make effective coalition formation much harder.

Finally, another important challenge for the formation of coalitions is the prevailing disagreements between the different groups. Of course, there are personal differences between the leaders of the groups but this is only part of the problem. More importantly, there is a conflict between more moderate and more progressive groups, which disagree over the form of tactics that should be used. Relatively moderate groups such as MARUAH or Think Centre prefer to take a more consultative approach and often cooperate with the government. Other groups aim to take positions at a greater distance from the government and are suspicious of cooperating with more moderate groups which have been at least partially co-opted into the state apparatus. Moreover, even within

the two camps, there are competing areas of interest which a particular group wants to represent. This is reflected in the feeling that there is a pecking order among groups in the same policy field. For instance, the Coalition of Singapore Non-Governmental Organizations did not include the Think Centre because the issues with which that organization deals are very similar to those of MARUAH, which sees itself as the main representative of human rights in Singapore. Moreover, the Think Centre does not believe it is necessary to strictly exclude the participation of members from political parties such as the Singapore Democratic Party.[9]

Despite all these restrictions, the fact that a coalition such as the Coalition of Singapore Non-Governmental Organizations was even formed clearly demonstrates that there is new 'coalitional capital' which has laid the basis for significant political change. Moreover, cooperation has paid off. The Coalition of Singapore Non-Governmental Organizations submitted its independent report to the Universal Periodic Review and was thus successful in achieving its goal. It was the first time in the history of the city-state that a human rights report was submitted. Similarly, the government also responded to the growing pressure from the Bukit Brown movement by deciding to construct a bridge spanning large parts of the cemetery, which meant that fewer graves would be affected by the project and more wildlife would be protected.

CONCLUSION

In the last few years, despite many restrictions on the development of a truly independent civil society, there has been a resurgence of activism in Singapore. This has become most visible in the formation of civil society coalitions, a phenomenon which only a few years ago was unheard of. These coalitions represent a strengthening of a more contentious part of civil society, which challenges the notion of fully co-opted civil societies in soft authoritarian regimes in South-East Asia and elsewhere. In fact, it demonstrates that civil society – understood in the liberal sense as an independent sphere between state and family – still enjoys considerable support and the pressures for liberalization have opened space for more activism than ever before.

At first, civil society coalitions were limited to political groups in the field of human rights. Their very nature as supporters of human rights had made them particularly difficult to co-opt for the illiberal

government. The first known coalition was the Solidarity for Migrant Workers, formed in 2009, which was mainly aimed at combining resources to help migrants in Singapore. In 2010, the Coalition of Singapore Non-Governmental Organizations was formed, combining eight groups into what is to date the largest alliance and which successfully achieved its goal of submitting a human rights report to the United Nations Periodic Review. Until June 2012, human rights activists were trying to combine their efforts for the first time to call for fundamental policy change. Their target was Singapore's Internal Security Act, which continues to hang like a sword of Damocles over political activism. At the same time, the spirit of cooperation has also affected the environmental and heritage movement, which was mobilized by the government's plan to build a highway through an ancient cemetery. The growing number of alliances demonstrates that, above all, there is growing 'coalitional capital' which indicates the beginning of the transformation of civil society. Once largely depoliticized, activists are increasingly willing to combine their efforts and challenge the regime. They have realized that greater unity is needed to challenge a regime that has historically attempted to depoliticize society and find technocratic solutions within the administrative state.

The changes in civil society have already had some impact on the government, which due to the growing pressure can no longer completely ignore demands from societal actors. This was made evident during the campaign against the partial destruction of the historic cemetery. In contrast to the heyday of the People's Action Party's hegemonic control over politics, the government was willing to compromise with the activists. This change of strategy by the government could signify the beginning of an even more assertive civil society in which political activism increasingly becomes a legitimate method and a growing number of coalitions are formed to increase the effectiveness of the many small groupings in regard to common goals.

NOTES

[1] In particular, civil society, understood as a sphere independent of the state, has led to its association with democratization, which has been seen as favourable by some governments interested in advancing the cause of democracy. Others, however, have viewed these organizations with suspicion as they could create instability. This is especially the case for soft authoritarian regimes, which are prevalent in South-East Asia.

[2] Comprehensive overviews of the research on civil society in South-East Asia can be found in, for instance, Weiss (2008) and Hughes (2009).

[3] This challenges the notion that the Singaporean government has been effective in implementing new administrative modes of participation. See Rodan and Jayasuriya (2007).

[4] There are only a token 100 websites blocked.

[5] Interview with Kirsten Han, former deputy editor of the Online Citizen, Hong Kong, 2011.

[6] Interview with James Gomez, former executive director for Singaporeans for Democracy, Singapore, 2011.

[7] Facebook interview with James Gomez, former executive director for Singaporeans for Democracy, 2013

[8] Facebook interview with Martyn See, film maker and human rights activist, 2013.

[9] Facebook interview with Martyn See, film maker and human rights activist, 2013.

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